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SUBJECT: IBB, ALIYU AND THE RACE FOR NIGERIA'S PRESIDENCY

REF: A. ABUJA 1850

[B](#). LAGOS 1273

CLASSIFIED BY CDA ANDREWS. REASON: 1.5(B) and (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: IBB is not running, for now, and neither is Aliyu Mohammed, according to several political insiders. But both retired generals are deeply frustrated with incumbent retired general Olusegun Obasanjo. There are pressures on IBB to run, but he carries heavy baggage. If the North can coalesce around a consensus team, perhaps one headed by a career civilian, OO will face a campaign trail as potholed as most Nigerian roads. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Olusegun Obasanjo came to power in 1999 with the support of fellow former military head of state Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (IBB) and an erstwhile Customs officer named Atiku Abubakar. Atiku had inherited the political machinery of the late Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, OO's deputy following the assassination of Murtala Mohammed. Unlike Obasanjo, Yar'Adua did not survive imprisonment by their former subordinate, Sani Abacha, but his Peoples Democratic Movement (PDM) evolved into the core of today's ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). Playing a strong supporting role in the IBB camp was retired Lieutenant General Aliyu Mohammed (political folklore has it that Mohammed helped convince a skeptical Obasanjo that IBB was sincere when he stated that he would support Obasanjo for president in 1999). Aliyu, Oladipo Diya and Sani Abacha comprised the triumvirate of active generals that told Interim National Government Chairman Chief Ernest Shonekan to resign in late [1](#)994. Abacha outmaneuvered Aliyu, taking the top job and retiring his fellow Northerner. Diya held the number two job under Abacha until he, like Obasanjo and Yar'Adua, was convicted of coup-plotting. Today, Aliyu is Obasanjo's National Security Advisor, Atiku is Vice President, and IBB looms darkly in the background -- perennial potential candidate, the dream of some and nightmare of others. Together, they form the new (retired) generals' triumvirate and will figure critically in Obasanjo's prospects for a second term.

[1](#)3. (C) From about September of last year, Nigeria was awash with rumors that Obasanjo might drop Atiku in favor of a running mate from the Northwest. Kaduna Governor Makarfi was prominently mentioned, and his staff were busily preparing their boss. The intensity of speculation grew as Obasanjo repeatedly pushed back the official announcement of his re-election plans. Obasanjo's eventual announcement that he planned to retain Atiku on the ticket seemed lukewarm to many observers here. Atiku himself privately acknowledged to CDA June 24 that there had been some strains but averred that everything had now been worked out. Another political insider commented that cooler political minds had prevailed in the struggle for Obasanjo's attention, convincing him that he could not win without the political machinery Atiku controls. Atiku privately alluded to this reality, noting with some pride that this control and his winning the day on the question of whether to fight for every state (septel) had helped to attenuate political violence during the electoral cycle thus far.

[1](#)4. (S) More recently, rumors have been rife that Aliyu had plans to run against his boss, either as a stalking horse for IBB or as IBB's candidate. According to a political figure close to Aliyu and IBB, Obasanjo decided to check out those rumors by paying some Northern political figures, including at least one governor, to approach Aliyu and urge him to run. One of the men approached apparently told Aliyu. In early June, the source continued, Aliyu asked for a meeting with Obasanjo and Atiku (as witness) and complained bitterly that Obasanjo had lacked sufficient respect for him to ask him his intentions directly. He had put his life at risk to support Obasanjo and had faithfully implemented Obasanjo's decisions, Aliyu reportedly continued, so he deserved better than this sort of skullduggery. Obasanjo quickly apologized, the source concluded, but had lost stature in the eyes of both

Aliyu and Atiku as a result.

15. (C) CDA mentioned the rumors to Aliyu during a June 25 meeting and asked what he thought. Aliyu said he worked for the President and was a member of the ruling party. He said the rumors arose from a list the Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF) had compiled of possible Northern contestants. ACF had no one's mandate to produce such a list, Aliyu continued, but its existence had led the backers of several nascent parties to ask him to join them. He was not interested in joining any party other than the PDP and had rebuffed all entreaties.

COMMENT: We note that Aliyu did not specifically rule out running for President. END COMMENT.

16. (C) Several players from different parts of the political spectrum have told us recently that IBB is not planning to run against Obasanjo. However, an occasional IBB adviser told Consulate General Lagos (ref B) that the former Head of State would announce his candidacy on August 17, and two of the newly-registered political parties (NDP and UNPP) want IBB as their flag-bearer. IBB is also nervous about the Buhari candidacy, fearing that the man he overthrew in 1985 would probably order his arrest within 24 hours of assuming office. Babangida's strong ties to the elite would trump Buhari's popularity with the Northern masses and preclude the tiny possibility of Buhari (who would have great difficulty attracting votes outside the far North) actually winning the election. IBB is renowned for changing stories to suit his changing audiences, so interlocutors tend to hear what IBB thinks they want to hear. He's not running yet, but he's clearly keeping his options open.

17. (S/NF) Meanwhile, British Deputy High Commissioner met with Atiku, who said that the "triumvirate" would continue to support Obasanjo for the time being. However, if he (Atiku) decided to pull up stakes, he was sure Aliyu would come with him. If Atiku and Aliyu were to switch their support to IBB, a prospect we find unlikely given Atiku's own ambitions, OO would have a very hard time winning anything resembling an open and transparent election.

18. (C) Atiku told CDA privately that he felt the Obasanjo-Atiku ticket would prevail. But Emeka Ihedioha, one of his strategists, said immediately afterward that the ticket was in deep trouble in the South; there were only seven where the team could feel "comfortable." Outside the Northeast, the North was mostly hostile territory - a point on which most observers are in agreement.

19. (S/NF) Party Chairman Audu Ogbeh thought it likely IBB was not himself quite sure which way to jump. Ogbeh pointed out that IBB carried heavy baggage from his years in office. Aside from the damage he inflicted on national institutions (a point that influential Northern elder Liman Ciroma often makes), IBB faced serious unresolved human rights charges, notably complicity in the assassination of journalist Dele Giwa. Moreover, Ogbeh continued, IBB's financial resources were not of the magnitude many assumed; he had lost a fortune when Aliyu Dasuki suddenly died (Aliyu Mohammed subsequently married Dasuki's widow, Jamila) and probably could not finance a Presidential campaign without significant help from his friends. Ogbeh said IBB had specifically disavowed any interest in the 2003 election in a recent private chat, but Ogbeh just as quickly added that IBB could not be trusted to speak frankly about his intentions. Ogbeh sharply criticized President Obasanjo, however, saying that his penchant for international travel and inattention to waste, corruption and decaying terms of trade left the PDP vulnerable.

110. (C) COMMENT: Because IBB tends to say what people want to hear, he has become many different things to different people. His support in certain circles runs strong because various groupings are vying to make him their leader. If IBB eventually decides to run, he will have to choose his venue from among three parties - ANPP, UNPP and NDP. The former offers him a way to knock Buhari (his personal nightmare) out of the running early. The other two are filled with people desperate for his profile and presumed deep pockets as the vehicle to ride to larger electoral success. Once he picks (assuming he eventually decides to run), some of the praise-singers will line up behind other candidates. He will have to face more scrutiny and start answering at least a few questions concretely. In the process, some who now see him as their political messiah will grow disillusioned.

111. (C) Conversely, Obasanjo and Atiku are not in quite as bad political shape as Ihedioha thinks. Yes, they are deeply unpopular, and that is because their government has failed to deliver material "democracy dividends" to most Nigerians.

But the opposition candidates who have announced intentions thus far manifestly lack the potential to win national office (Buhari has high name recognition but cannot overcome strong negatives). Obasanjo and Atiku suffer because the country is in poor shape and, as its leaders, they are being blamed. At some point, parties will hold primaries and conventions and nominate flag-bearers. To win, these individuals will have to overcome the powerful perquisites available to incumbents, and they will have to show disillusioned Nigerians why they can do better than the incumbents have done. Since most, if not all, of the likely challengers are tainted by service with past non-performing governments, that task may prove difficult to accomplish.

12. (C) The first 11 paragraphs of this message focus on generals and retired generals. Generally, Nigerians are tiring of retired generals. Cynical calculations of regional balance will probably govern the selection of those who will seriously challenge Obasanjo and Atiku for national office. A Southeast-Northwest axis (ref A) would be the best choice from that depressingly familiar perspective. But the party that can come up with strong candidates who meet the needs of regional balance while avoiding the temptation to recycle former military rulers into the top slots of its ticket may find it has what is needed to resonate with the electorate and give the incumbents a run for their money.

ANDREWS